

Blood in Gravenport

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A Corpse and a Cigarette

The rain painted the alley in a thousand shades of regret, each drop smearing the filth like an artist with a broken hand. I stood there, bleeding, smoking, watching the life leak out of her like a cheap bottle of wine spilled across the pavement.

Eleanor Voss.

She was stretched out under the dim glow of a busted streetlamp, red curls sticking to her face, the dress she'd worn tonight torn at the hem, now clinging to her body like a last apology. Her lips, once full of songs, were parted just slightly, like she had something to say but ran out of time.

A damn shame. She was the only thing in this city that wasn't rotten.

The cigarette hung between my fingers, its ember barely holding on against the cold. I let the smoke slither down my throat, felt it crawl through my lungs before slipping out between my teeth in a slow, bitter sigh. The pain in my ribs told me I'd been in a fight. The taste of copper in my mouth said I hadn't won.

I crouched next to her, careful not to let my shadow fall over the body. It didn't feel right. The city had already stolen enough from her—her voice, her future, her breath. It could keep my goddamn shadow.

The blood had pooled fast, soaking into the cracks of the pavement. It glistened under the neon glow of a liquor store sign across the street, flashing "Open 24 Hours" like it was some kind of invitation. The kind of place where bad men went to kill their livers after killing something else.

I reached into my coat pocket, fingers brushing past my lighter, my knife, the stub of a bus ticket to nowhere. Then I found it—the matchbook she'd given me just hours before. The Blue Serpent Club. A swanky joint where a dame like Eleanor could be a queen, even if the throne was a sticky barstool and her crown a microphone.

I flipped it open. 405 Bleaker Street was scrawled inside in shaky ink.

She must've known she was running out of time.

A gust of wind howled through the alley, sending a shiver down my spine. Or maybe that was the sirens, growing louder by the second. The bastards were close now. Too close.

I had two choices. Stand here and let them find me with a dead girl at my feet, or get the hell out and find out who put her there.

I took one last drag and flicked the cigarette onto the wet ground. The ember hissed, snuffed out just like Eleanor.

Then I pocketed the matchbook and walked into the rain.

The Blue Serpent was the kind of place that swallowed men whole.

It sat on the corner of Bleaker and 7th, its neon sign flickering like a bad memory—blue light buzzing against the rain-slick pavement, casting long, serpentine shadows. Inside, smoke curled toward the ceiling, wrapping itself around the chandeliers like it was trying to choke the life out of them. The air smelled of spilled gin, cheap perfume, and lies dressed up pretty.

I was nursing a whiskey when she walked onstage.

Eleanor Voss.

She wasn't the kind of beautiful that hit you all at once. It crept up on you, slow and steady, like the first drag of a cigarette after a long stretch in hell. Her voice was the same—low, smoky, laced with something that made the whole room shut up and listen. Even the card sharks at the back tables, the ones who wouldn't look up from their hands if the place caught fire, paused for a beat when she sang.

I watched her the way a man watches a loaded gun—admiring the craftsmanship, aware of the danger.

When the song ended, the spell broke. The noise came back, laughter and clinking glasses rushing in like a busted dam. Eleanor stepped off the stage and disappeared behind a heavy red curtain. I tossed back the rest of my drink and followed.

She was waiting in the dressing room, standing in front of a mirror that had seen better days. One of the bulbs had burned out. It left half her reflection in shadow.

"You always sneak into dressing rooms, Vince?" she asked without turning around.

"Only when the lady's in trouble," I said. "And you got that look."

She met my eyes in the mirror. "What look?"

"Like someone's already writing your obituary."

A small, tired smile. "Maybe they are."

I leaned against the vanity, watching her. "Who?"

She sighed, pulling a cigarette from a silver case. I lit it for her, and she took a long drag before answering.

"Lucius Cain."

That name hit the room like a gunshot.

Cain was the kind of man who didn't just run the city—he owned it. The cops, the judges, the kind of politicians who smiled big while their pockets were lined with blood money. If he wanted you dead, you were dead. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But soon.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

She hesitated, exhaling smoke through parted lips. "Bad."

"You steal from him?"

She shook her head. "Worse. I know something I shouldn't."

I waited.

She finally turned to me, stepping close enough that I could smell the whiskey on her breath, the faint trace of vanilla perfume underneath it. "I have a ledger, Vince. A list of names. Payments. Secrets. Enough to burn Cain's whole empire down."

My gut tightened. "Where is it?"

She pulled something from her pocket. A matchbook.

The Blue Serpent. I flipped it open. Inside, scrawled in shaky ink—405 Bleaker Street.

"You're giving this to me?" I asked.

She swallowed hard. "I'm giving you a chance to walk away."

I flicked the matchbook between my fingers. "You know me better than that."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Yeah," she said softly. "I do."

Somewhere beyond the walls of the club, thunder rumbled.

Her fingers tightened around the matchbook like it was the only thing keeping her tethered to this world. I watched the way her knuckles paled, the way her lips parted slightly, like she was about to say something she'd regret.

"I don't need your help, Vince," she said. But the shake in her voice said otherwise.

I leaned against the vanity, letting the silence hang between us like smoke. The kind of silence that begs for a confession.

"Yeah?" I finally said. "Because it looks to me like you've got a dead-end road ahead and a man like Lucius Cain standing at the finish line with a loaded gun."

She turned away, exhaling slow, tapping ash from her cigarette into a chipped porcelain tray. "I've handled myself this long."

I let out a dry chuckle. "Handled yourself right into needing a bodyguard."

That got her attention. Her shoulders tensed, but she didn't turn. The mirror reflected her face, half-shadowed by the burnt-out bulb, half-lit by the dying glow of her cigarette.

"I know what men like you want, Vince."

I sighed. "You think I'm here for a payday?"

She didn't answer. She didn't have to.

I took a step closer, slow, careful, like I was approaching a wounded animal. "I'm not here for money, Eleanor."

She laughed softly, but there wasn't any humor in it. "Then why are you here?"

I thought about that one for a second. The truth was, I wasn't sure. Maybe it was the way she sang—like she'd lived a thousand lives and each one ended in heartbreak. Maybe it was the fear in her eyes, the kind that was real, not the kind a dame fakes when she's got a con in motion. Or maybe it was because I was sick of this city eating people alive and pretending it wasn't hungry.

I reached out, taking the cigarette from her fingers and crushing it against the edge of the vanity. "Because Cain needs to be put down. And you don't stand a chance alone."

She finally turned to face me. Her eyes flicked over my face, searching for something. A lie. A trick. Some sign that I was just another piece of this city, waiting to chew her up and spit her out.

She didn't find it.

Instead, she sighed, her shoulders sagging like she'd been holding up the weight of the world and was just now realizing how heavy it was.

"Dammit, Vince," she murmured.

Then, finally, she slipped the matchbook into my palm.

It was warm from where she'd been holding it. I turned it over, flipping the cover open with my thumb.

405 Bleaker Street.

I stared at the address, my mind already running through possibilities. A safe house? A drop spot? A dead-end that led nowhere?

When I looked back up, Eleanor was watching me with something close to relief. Or maybe regret.

"You're making a mistake," she said.

I smirked. "Wouldn't be my first."

I pocketed the matchbook and turned toward the door. Behind me, Eleanor let out a breath, the kind you don't know you're holding until it's too late.

I didn't look back.

Because the second I took that matchbook, I knew one thing for sure.

This city wasn't done bleeding yet.

The past faded like smoke in the rain.

I was back in the alley, back in the cold, back in the goddamn mess. Eleanor lay crumpled at my feet, the rain turning her blood into dark rivulets that slithered toward the gutter. Somewhere behind me, a bottle rolled, clinking softly against the pavement—some drunk, passed out in the filth, unaware he'd spent the night sleeping next to a fresh corpse.

The sirens were getting louder.

I pulled the matchbook from my pocket, running my thumb over the worn edges. 405 Bleaker Street. I should have gone straight there when she handed it to me. Maybe she'd still be alive. Maybe she wouldn't be cooling off in a back alley while the city kept moving, pretending it hadn't just swallowed another soul whole.

A useless maybe.

I flipped the cover back, pulled out a match, and struck it against the damp cardboard. It flared up, burning bright for half a second before dimming under the drizzle. I lifted it to my cigarette, taking a long drag as I watched the flame flicker.

Then I let the match drop.

It landed in a puddle, hissing like the city itself was telling me to leave it alone.

No chance.

I pocketed the matchbook and turned, walking fast, keeping to the shadows. I had about thirty seconds before the cops pulled up, before they found Eleanor and started looking for someone to slap cuffs on.

And in a city like this, the truth didn't mean a damn thing. They wouldn't care who pulled the trigger. They'd care who was left standing when they arrived.

That meant I had two choices.

I could stay, hands raised, trying to talk my way out of it—pretend the boys in blue still gave a damn about justice.

Or I could do what I was best at.

Disappear.

I didn't think twice. My boots splashed through the wet pavement, my coat whipping behind me as I cut through the maze of alleyways, heading for the only thing left of Eleanor's story.

405 Bleaker Street.

I moved before the red-and-blues could catch up.

The city swallowed me whole, just like it always did.

Rain pounded the pavement as I slipped into the shadows, past the neon haze of liquor stores and late-night diners, down an alley where the air reeked of piss and desperation. A place where even the rats kept their heads down.

Gravenport was a city that ran on predators and prey. Right now, I was both.

The cops would be after me soon—guys who took orders from men like Lucius Cain, who didn't give a damn about the truth as long as they had a body to pin the crime on. But they weren't the only ones looking.

Cain had men, too. The kind that didn't wear badges, didn't follow rules, didn't leave loose ends. And if they knew Eleanor had given me the matchbook before she died, I was next on their list.

I cut across a deserted street, stepping over puddles that looked too much like blood. 405 Bleaker Street. That was the only lead I had. And leads didn't stay warm long in a city like this.

Behind me, an engine revved.

I didn't have to turn around to know I was being followed.

I ducked into a side alley, weaving through dumpsters and fire escapes, my boots splashing through puddles as I moved. The car idled at the mouth of the alley, waiting. Watching.

Then the headlights snapped off.

I exhaled slowly, my breath turning to mist.

The law wanted me. The lawless wanted me.

And I wasn't in the mood to be caught.

The Black Hand

405 Bleaker Street was the kind of place the city forgot—then buried under more filth just to be sure.

The building was an old tenement, a crumbling corpse of brick and rot wedged between a pawnshop and a boarded-up pharmacy. The windows were either shattered or so thick with grime they might as well have been. A neon motel sign across the street flickered weakly, casting sickly yellow light onto the rain-slick pavement.

I stood outside, hands deep in my coat pockets, letting the night settle around me.

Eleanor had sent me here for a reason. And if Lucius Cain's men had gotten here first, I already knew what I was walking into.

I stepped inside.

The stench hit me first—mold, piss, and something coppery that told me I was too late.

The hallway was narrow, lined with peeling wallpaper and doors that looked like they hadn't been locked in decades. A single overhead bulb buzzed, swaying slightly, sending jittery shadows across the floor. Somewhere down the hall, a baby was crying. Somewhere else, a couple was screaming at each other in a language I didn't understand.

Bleaker Street. It lived up to its name.

I moved carefully, boots silent against the warped wooden floor, following the scent of blood. It led me to a half-open door at the end of the hall.

Inside, the place looked like a hurricane had passed through. A single lightbulb swung from the ceiling, barely illuminating the wreckage. A table was overturned. Drawers were pulled out, their contents scattered—old bills, a pack of smokes, a revolver with the cylinder popped open, empty.

And in the center of it all, tied to a chair, was Lucky Sal.

He wasn't looking so lucky.

Sal was a bottom-feeder, the kind of guy who always had dirt on someone but never enough power to be a real player. He ran numbers, fixed fights, whispered secrets for cash. The kind of guy you could find in every bar in Gravenport, leaning against the wall, selling information to the highest bidder.

But someone had decided he'd said too much.

His face was swollen to hell, one eye completely shut, his lip split and crusted with dried blood. His suit—cheap to begin with—was soaked in sweat and something darker. His hands trembled against the rope tying him down, his breath ragged.

I crouched next to him, careful, watching his chest rise and fall like it was taking real effort. His good eye fluttered open, rolling until it found me.

He let out a weak, breathy laugh. "Vince... Kade." His voice was barely a whisper. "Shit. I must be dying if you're here."

I pulled a switchblade from my pocket and flicked it open, slicing through the ropes around his wrists. "Who did this to you, Sal?"

He coughed, deep and wet, like his lungs were filled with gravel. "You already know."

I didn't answer. I just waited.

His head lolled to the side, his breath coming shorter now. "Cain," he finally croaked. "Cain's people. They were looking for... for something."

I already knew what.

"The ledger?" I asked.

His mouth twitched in something like a smile. "She told you, huh?"

I didn't respond.

Sal coughed again, shuddering. "You're... already too deep, Kade. You don't walk away from Cain. Nobody does."

I pressed a hand against his shoulder, steadying him. "Where is it, Sal?"

His good eye locked onto mine. There was something there. Not just pain. Something worse.

Fear.

He swallowed hard. Then, with the last bit of breath he had left, he muttered a name.

"Lucius Cain."

His body went slack. His head lolled forward, chin resting on his chest.

Lucky Sal wasn't so lucky anymore.

I exhaled, slow and steady, and stood up, slipping the switchblade back into my pocket.

Cain had been cleaning house. And I was next on his list.

Lucky Sal was dead before his name even left his lips.

"Lucius Cain."

The words rattled in my head like loose bullets in a revolver.

Cain wasn't just a kingpin. He was the city's damn executioner. The man who whispered into judges' ears, had cops pocketing hush money like it was air, and ran the streets with a quiet, efficient cruelty that made every other crime boss in Gravenport look like an amateur. He didn't just buy people—he owned them. The ones who didn't sell their souls ended up like Sal, broken and bleeding, waiting for death like it was a formality.

I stepped back, watching Sal's head slump forward, the last breath rattling out of his busted lungs. His body sagged against the chair, arms limp at his sides. The blood pooling at his feet was already starting to cool.

I'd seen men die before.

But something about this felt different.

Maybe it was because I knew I was next.

The rain outside hadn't let up. It drummed against the cracked windows like a heartbeat, steady and slow. I let my gaze drift around the room, taking in the chaos—overturned chairs, empty drawers, a half-smoked cigarette crushed into the floorboards. Sal had fought, that much was clear.

But Cain's men had wanted him alive—long enough to get what they needed.

I reached down, patting Sal's jacket. His pockets were empty. No wallet, no cash, not even a pack of smokes. Cain's guys had cleaned him out. But they'd left him here, dumped in this rotting tenement like trash, his body a message carved in bruises and broken bones.

I looked at the matchbook still in my palm.

Eleanor had sent me here for a reason.

But all I found was a dead man with a name I already knew.

I took a step back, exhaling slow. My ribs ached where I'd taken a few punches earlier in the night. It reminded me that I was still breathing, still moving—at least for now.

Then I heard it.

Footsteps.

Slow, deliberate. Coming from the hall outside.

I turned toward the door, heart hammering against my ribs.

Cain's men didn't like loose ends.

And I was standing in the middle of one.

Gravenport had a heartbeat. You just had to know where to put your ear to hear it.

It pulsed in the places where men gambled away their rent money and their last shred of dignity. Where smoke curled toward ceilings stained with the ghosts of bad decisions. Where music played just loud enough to drown out the screams from the alley out back.

If there were answers, they were down here, buried beneath cheap whiskey and perfume that smelled expensive but wasn't.

I started with Jimmy Two-Fingers, a bookmaker who ran a dice game out of a backroom at Marlowe's, a joint where the walls sweated liquor and desperation. Jimmy was always good for information—usually. But when I leaned over the table and said Lucius Cain's name, his whole body tensed like I'd just pulled a knife.

"Jesus, Vince," he hissed, flicking his eyes around like the walls had ears. "You got a death wish?"

"Maybe," I said, tossing back a shot of something that burned all the way down. "But I'd rather not go out blind. You know anything about Cain and a ledger?"

His fingers twitched. That told me he did.

"Don't know what you're talking about," he muttered, scooping up the dice and shaking them in his fist. "And even if I did, I wouldn't be dumb enough to say it out loud."

The dice tumbled across the table. Snake eyes.

"Suit yourself," I said, standing up. "If you change your mind, I'll be around."

I left him staring at the dice like they'd spelled out his fate.

Next stop was The Velvet Noose, a strip club where the dancers smiled like they meant it, but their eyes told you the truth. I found Nico Lupo—low-level enforcer, good at breaking bones but not much else—sitting at the bar nursing a glass of bourbon he couldn't afford.

"Nico," I greeted, sliding onto the stool beside him.

He tensed. "Kade."

"Relax," I said, waving the bartender over. "We're just having a drink."

He let out a slow breath and nodded toward the bartender. "Make it two."

The drinks came. We raised our glasses. He swallowed his in one go. I took my time.

"Word is," I said, setting my glass down, "Lucius Cain's looking for something."

Nico went still.

I continued. "Word is, Eleanor Voss had it before she wound up dead."

His jaw tightened.

"Word is," I pressed, "that ledger could burn Cain's whole goddamn empire down."

The glass in his hand trembled just a little.

"You know something, Nico," I said quietly.

He exhaled, slow, measured. Then he turned to me, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Even if I did," he said, "I wouldn't live long enough to tell you."

A man like Lucius Cain didn't leave paper trails.

Not the kind that could be used against him.

If there was a ledger out there—real, physical proof of the money laundering, the bribes, the killings—it was the kind of thing people got buried for. Eleanor had known something, and it had gotten her killed. Now I needed to know what she knew.

And I was done asking politely.

His name was Danny Sweets—a lowlife with bad habits and worse debts. The kind of guy who ran messages between crime bosses when the phones weren't safe. He had enough connections to be useful but not enough to be important. That's why he was still alive.

I found him behind Dante's, a dive bar where the drinks were watered down and the men were mean. He was leaning against a dumpster, fumbling with a cigarette, hands shaking too much to light it.

I stepped out of the shadows. "You look nervous, Danny."

His head snapped up, eyes wide. "Shit—Kade. You can't just—"

I grabbed him by the collar and slammed him against the brick wall. "Sure I can."

He choked on his own breath. "Listen—man, I don't know what you think I know—"

I drove my forearm into his throat, cutting off the rest. "Let's skip the part where you play dumb. Eleanor Voss. The ledger. Start talking."

Danny's eyes darted around, looking for an escape that wasn't there. His lips trembled, his pulse hammering under my grip. "Kade, you don't understand—"

"Make me understand."

I let up just enough for him to breathe. He gasped like a drowning man breaking the surface, his hands clutching at my sleeve.

"They were looking for it," he wheezed. "Cain's guys. A few nights ago—before she died. Eleanor was scared, man. Said she had something big. Something that could ruin him."

"The ledger?"

He nodded frantically. "Yeah. It had names. Numbers. Everything. She said if it got out, it'd bring the whole operation down."

I tightened my grip. "Where is it?"

Danny shook his head wildly. "I don't know! I swear, I don't! She wouldn't tell me—just kept saying she needed to get out of town first. But Cain's men—" He coughed, his face turning red. "They thought I knew where she kept it."

I leaned in close, my voice low. "Do you?"

His whole body was trembling now. "No," he gasped. "I don't, I swear. All I know is she was meeting someone. Some guy—old contact. A fixer. She said if anything happened to her, he'd know what to do."

I narrowed my eyes. "Who?"

Danny hesitated. Then, just as his mouth opened—

Click.

The unmistakable sound of a gun cocking behind me.

Shit.

"Boss says hello," a voice murmured.

I barely had time to react before the gunfire started.

The words had barely left his mouth before the first shot rang out.

I dropped low.

The muzzle flash split the darkness, bright enough to paint the alley in white-hot streaks for half a second. The bullet whistled past my ear, close enough that I felt the air shift. Danny Sweets wasn't as lucky. The round caught him in the chest, slamming him back against the brick wall.

He made a sound—half gasp, half gurgle—before sliding down, his hands clutching at the hole in his ribs like he could somehow hold the life in.

I didn't have time to see if he was dead. Because I was next.

The hitmen moved fast. Black gloves. Black coats. Black souls, if they had them. Professionals, the kind that didn't spray bullets like amateurs. Every shot was meant to kill.

I hit the ground hard, rolling behind a stack of busted wooden crates. Another bullet splintered through the wood, close enough that a shard caught my cheek. The sting was sharp, warm. I could smell the blood.

I pulled my .38, the old steel cold in my grip, and snapped off a shot at the nearest shadow. Miss.

The bastards were moving, flanking, trying to box me in. No time to think.

I popped up, squeezed off two rounds. One hit home.

A grunt. A stumble. The second guy fell back, clutching his side. Not dead, but hurt. That was enough.

The first hitman was still standing, still firing. Another shot clipped the dumpster beside me, sending a ricochet screaming into the night.

I needed an out.

The alley stretched behind me, slick with rain, leading back toward the main street. I had two choices—stay here and get chewed up by Cain’s hounds, or run like hell and hope the city swallowed me faster than they could.

Not much of a choice.

I turned and bolted.

A bullet tore into the brick near my shoulder as I ran, sending chunks of mortar spraying into the air. My boots pounded against the wet pavement, each step a countdown I wasn’t sure I’d finish.

Another shot—closer this time.

The street was just ahead, the neon glow of a liquor store sign flickering like a bad omen. I could hear them behind me, chasing, closing in.

I hit the sidewalk, turning fast, disappearing into the city before the next bullet could find its home.

I was still breathing.

For now.

No Room for Angels

The city stretched its jaws, ready to swallow me whole.

I staggered through the rain, one hand clamped over the fresh wound in my side, the other gripping my .38 so tight my knuckles turned white. Blood mixed with the downpour, trailing behind me in long, red streaks across the pavement.

Doc Miro’s place was four blocks away.

Four blocks through enemy territory, through the dark veins of a city that would rather bury me than save me. Cain's men weren't done. They'd be looking. The cops too, probably. A dead girl. A dead informant. And me—alive, for now.

I ducked into a side street, boots splashing in a puddle that reeked of piss and old whiskey. A neon sign flickered ahead—JACK'S PAWN & LOAN. A place that traded in broken things. People, too, if you had the right cash.

I pushed forward, ribs screaming, vision tunneling. The adrenaline was running out, and the pain was kicking in. Hard.

Another block.

I passed a bar with no name, just a red door and the smell of stale beer leaking into the street. Inside, men were laughing, clinking glasses, celebrating whatever miserable sins they'd gotten away with today.

I wasn't in the mood to celebrate.

Finally, Miro's.

A single, flickering red light above a door with no number. To anyone else, it was nothing. Just another forgotten building in a city full of them.

To the bleeding, the dying, and the wanted—it was the last place you went before the grave.

I stumbled up the steps and slammed my fist against the door three times.

Nothing.

I gritted my teeth, banged harder. The pain in my side flared, my vision swam.

The peephole slid open, and two yellow-stained eyes peered out.

"Who's knocking like they got a death wish at this hour?"

"Open the goddamn door, Miro."

A pause. Then, "Kade?"

"Yeah," I growled. "Unless I bleed out in the next thirty seconds. Then I guess you can call me a corpse."

The peephole snapped shut. A moment later, the locks clicked, and the door swung open.

Miro wasn't much to look at. Thin, ratty hair, a pair of glasses that hadn't been cleaned in years, and a cigarette always stuck to his lip. He was dressed in a wrinkled shirt and an old medical coat that might've been white once. Maybe.

He took one look at me, sighed, and muttered, "Christ, Vince. What'd you do this time?"

I pushed past him, stepping into the dimly lit clinic. It smelled like antiseptic and burnt coffee, the kind of place that had seen more bullet wounds than checkups.

Miro shut the door behind me. Locked it. Bolted it. That was the kind of place this was.

I collapsed onto the nearest chair.

"You got a minute?" I asked, breathing hard.

Miro exhaled smoke through his nose, shaking his head. "For you, Kade? Always."

Then he grabbed his tools. And the pain really started.

Miro worked fast. He always did.

The clinic was little more than a backroom with bad lighting, a rusted metal table, and enough stolen medical supplies to patch up every crook, hustler, and trigger-happy bastard in Gravenport.

I sat on the edge of that table, shirt peeled off, the wound in my side laid open under the glow of a flickering lamp. Miro muttered under his breath as he threaded a needle, the tip glinting in the low light.

"This is gonna hurt," he warned.

"Just sew me up, Doc."

Miro took a final drag of his cigarette, flicked the ash onto the floor, then pressed his fingers against the bullet wound. A fresh jolt of pain shot through me, white-hot and sharp.

I clenched my jaw, breathing through my teeth.

"Jesus, Vince," he muttered, shaking his head. "You ever think about getting a new hobby?"

"Like what?" I rasped. "Gardening?"

"Yeah," Miro said, stabbing the needle into my skin. "I hear it's relaxing."

The first stitch went in. I let out a slow breath, staring at the ceiling, waiting for the worst of it to pass. It didn't.

"You gonna tell me who did this?" Miro asked.

I didn't answer.

He glanced up, caught the look on my face, and sighed like a man who already knew the answer.

"Cain."

I didn't confirm it. I didn't have to.

Miro kept stitching, his fingers steady despite the weight of what he'd just said. The room filled with silence—thick, heavy, suffocating. The only sounds were the soft drag of thread through flesh, the slow buzz of the overhead lamp, the distant hum of the city bleeding through the walls.

Then Miro muttered, "You don't take on Cain, Vince."

I didn't say anything.

"You don't even whisper his name," he continued, voice low, like he was afraid Cain's men would burst through the door the second he said it. "Not unless you got a death wish."

I swallowed hard, the pain in my side nothing compared to the weight settling in my chest.

"You hear me?" Miro pressed. "I mean it. Drop this. Whatever you're chasing—it ain't worth it."

I met his eyes. "She was."

That shut him up.

He exhaled through his nose, muttered something I didn't catch, then tied off the last stitch. He reached for a half-empty bottle of whiskey, poured a splash over the wound—just to make me hurt one last time—then tossed the bottle to me.

"Fine. Kill yourself. Just don't do it in my clinic."

I took a long swig, letting the burn chase the pain down. Then I stood, pulling my bloodstained shirt back over my head, wincing as the fabric stretched over fresh stitches.

Miro sighed again, rubbing a hand down his face.

"Where you going now?" he asked.

I grabbed my coat, shoved my revolver back into its holster, and started toward the door.

"405 Bleaker," I said.

Miro swore under his breath.

"Don't come back here if you get yourself shot again," he muttered.

I pulled the door open, stepping into the rain, the neon glow of Gravenport bleeding against the wet streets.

"Yeah," I said. "We both know I will."

Then I walked out into the night.

Eleanor's apartment sat on the fourth floor of a crumbling brownstone on the east side of town, just far enough from the neon-soaked filth of Gravenport's nightlife to feel like it belonged to another world. But it wasn't far enough. Not anymore.

I took the stairs slow, every step a reminder of the fresh stitches holding me together. The pain was sharp, a constant throb beneath my ribs, but it kept me awake, kept me moving. By the time I reached her door, I already knew what I was going to find.

It was open.

Not wide—just enough for the frame to splinter, the wood cracked where someone had put their weight behind a good kick. They hadn't bothered to be subtle.

I slid my revolver from its holster and nudged the door open with the barrel, stepping inside, careful, quiet.

The place was a wreck.

The couch cushions had been torn open, stuffing scattered like someone had been looking for diamonds instead of old change. The dresser drawers were pulled from their frames, dumped onto the floor. The mattress had been flipped, slashed down the center. A lamp lay in pieces in the corner, glass shards glinting under the weak glow of the streetlight filtering through the blinds.

Someone had been looking for something.

I already knew what.

The ledger.

I let out a slow breath and stepped deeper inside, gun still raised. The air smelled stale, like old perfume and the last traces of cigarette smoke. The scent clung to the walls, to the curtains, to the sheets.

To me.

I moved to the desk by the window. The drawers had been yanked out, their contents dumped, but something didn't feel right. It was too... thorough. Cain's men didn't take their time with things like this. They kicked down doors, they broke bones, they put bullets in heads. But this was different.

Someone else had been here first.

Someone who had been searching. And they hadn't found what they were looking for.

I crouched by the nightstand, running my fingers under the wooden lip. The edge was smooth at first, then rough, like it had been chipped away. I pressed against it. Nothing.

I moved to the closet, scanning the floorboards, the walls.

Then I saw it.

A single loose floorboard near the foot of the bed.

My pulse ticked up.

I slid my switchblade from my pocket, wedged it beneath the board, and pried it up. It came loose with a soft creak, revealing a folded scrap of paper tucked inside the space below.

I pulled it out, unfolded it.

The ink was smudged, hurried. Just a few words.

"If you're reading this, I'm dead. Find the ledger. Burn them all."

The words sat heavy in my hands, heavier than they should have. I stared at them for a long moment, listening to the city hum beyond the window, feeling the weight of Eleanor's last message settle in my chest.

Then, somewhere in the building, a floorboard creaked.

I wasn't alone.

I stared at the note, the words cutting through me like the cold steel of a blade pressed to my ribs.

"If you're reading this, I'm dead. Find the ledger. Burn them all."

The ink was smudged, rushed, like she hadn't had much time. Like she knew the walls were closing in. Eleanor had written this knowing she wouldn't make it out.

I folded the paper carefully, tucking it into my coat pocket. The weight of it felt heavier than it should have.

Somewhere outside, a car rolled past, its headlights casting long shadows through the broken blinds. The apartment was silent, the kind of stillness that felt unnatural, as if the air itself had stopped moving.

I stood slowly, scanning the wreckage again, my instincts crawling up my spine. Something felt off.

They had searched the place, torn it apart, but they hadn't found this note.

Which meant they'd be back.

Which meant they could still be here.

Then I heard it.

A soft creak from the hallway.

My grip tightened around the revolver in my hand, my pulse steady, slow. Someone was out there. Watching. Waiting.

I moved without a sound, stepping toward the wall beside the door, pressing my back against the peeling wallpaper. I listened.

Another step. Closer this time.

They weren't in a hurry. That told me two things: they thought I was alone. And they thought I was dead already.

I lifted the revolver, leveling it toward the doorway just as the handle twisted.

The door didn't swing open fast—it crept, inch by inch, like whoever was on the other side wanted to savor the moment. Like they already saw me laid out on the floor, same as Eleanor, with a bullet hole where my thoughts used to be.

I let them have their moment.

Then, as soon as I saw the shadow shift inside the room, I moved.

The barrel of my gun pressed against the first thing through the door—a ribcage. A body.

"Hands where I can see them," I said, my voice low, steady.

The door swung fully open, revealing the figure standing in the dim light.

A man in a dark suit, a scar running down his left cheek. His hands were empty—but his eyes were full of murder.

He smiled.

"Evening, Kade."

I recognized him.

Riley "Red" Moreau.

A private investigator with a mean right hook and a habit of selling his services to the highest bidder. And right now, I had a real bad feeling about who had hired him.

I didn't lower my gun.

"Evening, Red," I said. "You looking for me, or just casing apartments for fun?"

His smirk widened.

"Looking for you," he admitted. "But more importantly... looking for that ledger."

My grip tightened.

"Then I guess we got a problem," I said.

Red's grin didn't waver. If anything, it got sharper.

"Yeah," he murmured. "I guess we do."

The second Red's grin widened, I knew I was already too late.

The door exploded inward.

Not a slow creak, not a measured entrance—it was kicked in full-force, the kind of break-in meant to knock a man off his feet before he even reached for his gun. The splintered wood cracked against the wall, and before I could move, the room filled with bodies.

Two of them. Big. Fast.

The first guy—a bruiser built like a freight train, shaved head, tattoos creeping up his neck like veins full of poison. He came in swinging, a black leather sap flashing through the dim light.

The second one was leaner, slick black hair, sharp angles on his face—a knife fighter, judging by the way his hand rested near his belt. His eyes barely flicked to Red before snapping back to me.

They'd been waiting.

Red had been the distraction.

I barely had time to lift my gun before the sap crashed against my wrist. The pain was a white-hot spike shooting up my arm, and the revolver clattered to the floor. I moved on instinct, shifting back, my boot catching the edge of the overturned dresser behind me.

No time to think. I swung.

My fist connected with Tattoo's jaw, a solid hit, but he shrugged it off like a minor inconvenience. He came in again, fast, the sap whistling through the air. I ducked, felt the wind of it rush past my temple.

Knife was moving, too.

I caught the gleam of steel as he drew the blade—thin, curved, the kind meant for precision kills.

"Shit," I hissed under my breath.

I barely had time to roll as the blade slashed down, biting into my coat instead of my ribs. The leather split, but I was still breathing.

For now.

I moved, going for my switchblade—but Red was there, stepping in, grinning like this was a goddamn show.

"Now, now, Vince," he murmured, kicking my gun across the room. "Let's not make this messy."

I ignored him. My hands found the broken lamp on the nightstand, the ceramic base still mostly intact. I swung hard, fast, catching Tattoo just as he reared back.

It shattered against his skull.

The big man staggered, let out a deep grunt of pain—but he didn't drop.

Knife lunged again. I barely twisted in time. The blade sliced across my arm, sharp, hot, leaving behind a fresh streak of red.

I didn't feel it. Not yet.

Adrenaline had kicked in.

Tattoo shook off the hit, eyes burning with something feral. Knife licked his lips, ready for another go.

Red? Red just smiled.

I spat blood onto the floor. "You gonna fight, Red, or you just here to watch?"

He chuckled, stepping back. "I think I'll let the boys have their fun first."

My hands curled into fists.

Fun for them.

But they'd learn real soon—I didn't go down easy.

A Dame's Last Wish

Riley Red Moreau had always been the kind of bastard who'd smile while he put a knife in your back.

Now he wasn't smiling.

The first punch caught me hard across the jaw, snapping my head to the side. Stars exploded behind my eyes, my teeth clacking together like dice rattling in a cup. I staggered, tasting blood, whiskey, and the bad luck that had led me here.

Red didn't give me a second to recover.

He came in fast—faster than I remembered—driving a knee into my ribs. My fresh stitches screamed as the pain flared white-hot, but I gritted my teeth and stayed upright.

Red wanted me hurting, but not dead. Not yet.

"You've been busy, Kade," he muttered, shaking out his knuckles. "Lucky Sal. Eleanor. Cain's people are real interested in you."

I wiped the blood from my lip with the back of my hand. "They send you to bring me flowers, or are you just here to break all my teeth?"

"That ledger," Red said flatly. "Where is it?"

I let out a low chuckle, even though my ribs protested. "Let's pretend for a second I had it. What makes you think I'd give it to you?"

Red sighed, like he was already tired of me.

"Because you're bleeding," he said simply. "And because I haven't killed you yet."

His eyes were sharp, calculating. Red had worked both sides of the law for years—a detective with no badge and no conscience, selling what he knew to the highest bidder. If he was here, it meant one thing.

Lucius Cain wanted that ledger.

And Red wanted to be the one to hand it to him.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to shake the ache settling into my bones. "Even if I knew where it was, you think I'd just hand it over? You think Cain's gonna pat you on the back, maybe slip you a bonus?"

Red's smirk flickered. Just for a second.

Then his fist came for me again.

I was ready this time. I ducked, twisted, let the punch whistle past my ear. My elbow snapped up, catching him square in the ribs. He grunted, staggered—but Red had always been too damn fast.

His leg shot out, sweeping mine out from under me.

I hit the ground hard, my shoulder slamming against the floorboards. My gun was gone, kicked into the shadows. My body was screaming in pain, and Red was already moving.

He grabbed me by the collar, hauling me up, slamming me against the nearest wall.

The whole room spun.

"Where's the ledger, Kade?"

His breath was hot against my face, his grip like iron.

I grinned, even though it hurt. "Go to hell, Red."

His fist cocked back.

And that's when I moved.

I drove my knee up into his gut, hard. Red's breath hitched, his grip loosening just enough for me to shove him off. He stumbled back, his boots skidding across broken glass.

I didn't give him time to recover.

I threw a punch, putting my whole weight behind it.

My knuckles met his jaw with a crack.

Red staggered, blinking, his smirk finally wiped off his damn face.

For once, he looked surprised.

I flexed my fingers, blood dripping from my split knuckles.

"Guess you weren't expecting me to still have some fight left, huh?"

Red wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, checking for blood.

Then he grinned.

"Good," he said. "I like it when they fight back."

Red came at me like a freight train—fast, brutal, no wasted movement.

I took the first hit. A solid hook to the ribs that rattled my insides like loose change. Pain flared where my stitches pulled, hot and angry, but I gritted my teeth and stayed on my feet. Red had power, but he didn't expect me to still be standing.

Bad mistake.

He followed up with another swing—I ducked, felt the air shift over my head, and drove my fist into his gut. Hard.

Red let out a sharp grunt, stumbling back, but I wasn't done.

I moved in, fast, hitting him with a left cross to the jaw. His head snapped to the side, his boots scraping against the floorboards.

Red was used to being the one dishing out pain. He wasn't used to taking it.

I saw the shift in his eyes. Annoyance. Then surprise. Then something else—wariness.

"Guess you still got some fight left," he muttered, shaking his head like he was trying to clear the stars.

"Yeah," I rasped, rolling my shoulder, feeling the fire in my ribs. "But you're about to run out."

Red lunged. I was ready.

We crashed into the overturned dresser, sending splinters flying. He wrapped an arm around my throat, trying to choke me out. I slammed my elbow back into his ribs—once, twice—until his grip loosened.

I twisted free, brought my knee up into his gut.

He doubled over, coughing.

I grabbed him by the collar and drove his head into the nightstand.

The wooden frame cracked. So did Red.

He slumped down, his breath ragged, eyes unfocused. His fingers twitched like he was still thinking about throwing another punch.

I kicked his gun across the floor.

"Stay down, Red," I said, voice rough.

He blinked up at me, dazed, then let out a hoarse chuckle. "Damn. You really don't know when to quit, huh?"

"Never did."

His grin faded. His head lolled back, body sagging against the wreckage of what used to be Eleanor's furniture. He was out cold.

I let out a slow breath, rolling my shoulders, flexing my bruised knuckles. My body hurt all over.

But I'd won.

And now, I had questions that needed answering.

The Velvet Noose was the kind of place where men sold their souls, and women learned to live without theirs.

It sat on the west end of Gravenport, tucked between a rundown hotel and a butcher shop that never seemed to close. Red neon buzzed above the entrance, flickering like a bad omen. The air smelled like cheap perfume, expensive booze, and regret that never quite washed off.

I stood across the street, lighting a cigarette with fingers that still ached from my fight with Red. My ribs were screaming, my side throbbed, and my stitches felt like they were barely holding me together.

But I wasn't done. Not yet.

Eleanor had worked here.

Her last gig before she died. And if I was right—and I usually was—somebody inside knew more than they were letting on.

The Velvet Noose wasn't just a club. It was a front. Owned by Victor Greaves, one of Cain's top enforcers. If Cain was the emperor of Gravenport's underworld, Greaves was the executioner. The kind of guy who smiled while he broke bones. The kind that made men disappear.

And now I was about to walk straight into his house.

I took one last drag of my cigarette, tossed it into the gutter, and crossed the street.

The bouncer at the door was built like a brick wall, a bald slab of muscle with a bad attitude. His arms were crossed, blocking the entrance like a human roadblock.

I pulled my coat back just enough to let him see the .38 tucked under my ribs. Not a threat. Just a fact.

He scowled but stepped aside.

I walked in.

Inside, the club pulsed with smoke and heat.

A jazz band played low and slow, the kind of tune that made you feel like you were walking into a dream you wouldn't wake up from. Red velvet draped the walls, and the air was thick with cigar smoke. Girls in glittering dresses weaved between tables, balancing trays of drinks and empty smiles.

At the far end of the room, a stage.

A single spotlight bathed it in gold, illuminating the place where Eleanor used to stand.

I could still hear her voice.

Soft. Haunting. A melody that clung to your skin like perfume and regret.

I swallowed the thought and made my way to the bar.

A bartender was polishing a glass, a woman with dark eyes and a smirk like she knew every secret worth knowing. Her name was Delilah.

She saw me coming, arched an eyebrow.

"Kade," she murmured. "Didn't think I'd see you here."

I slid onto a stool, wincing as my ribs reminded me they were still broken. "Yeah, well. I got a habit of showing up in places I shouldn't."

She smirked, setting the glass down. "That habit's gonna get you killed."

I tapped my fingers against the bar. "Not tonight."

Delilah leaned in, her voice dropping to something almost a whisper. "Then I guess you're looking for something."

I met her eyes. "I'm looking for what Eleanor left behind."

The smirk faded.

For the first time, I saw something else in her expression. Worry. Fear.

Delilah glanced around the room, checking for ears. Then, in a voice only I could hear—

"Not here," she whispered.

I exhaled slow, rolling my shoulders. Yeah. That's what I thought.

Eleanor had left something behind.

And somebody wanted it buried.

Delilah's eyes flicked over my shoulder, scanning the room like she was making sure we were still alone. We weren't.

A place like The Velvet Noose was never empty, even when it looked that way. Conversations hummed low over clinking glasses, smoke curled toward the ceiling in slow spirals, and the band played a song that had been old before I was born.

But none of that mattered.

What mattered was the way Delilah leaned in close, her perfume cutting through the stench of cigars and sweat. What mattered was what she whispered next.

"Eleanor had a safe deposit box at Gravenport Bank."

That was all I needed to hear.

I exhaled slow, feeling the weight of the words settle in my chest.

Gravenport Bank wasn't just a bank. It was the bank. Cain's bank. The kind of place where money changed hands, but power changed lives. The kind of place where the books didn't always add up—because someone made sure they didn't.

If Eleanor had stashed something there, it meant one thing.

It was big.

"Tell me what's inside," I said.

Delilah shook her head. "I don't know. She never told me." She hesitated, then sighed. "But she was scared, Vince. Really scared. Told me if anything happened to her, that box was the only thing that mattered."

I clenched my jaw. She knew she was running out of time.

I glanced at the stage, at the microphone stand still sitting in the spotlight.

Eleanor had stood there a hundred nights, singing songs for men who weren't listening, smiling for people who didn't care. And all the while, she'd been sitting on something that could bring Cain's empire crashing down.

I turned back to Delilah. "Who else knows about the box?"

She hesitated.

Then, quietly, "Cain's men are looking for it."

They tore her apartment apart and found nothing. Now they were following the same trail I was.

That meant I had to move. Fast.

Delilah reached for a fresh glass, poured whiskey into it like she needed something to do with her hands.

"You sure you want to go down this road, Vince?" she murmured. "You and me both know how this ends."

I reached for the glass, lifted it, let the burn settle deep in my chest before setting it back down.

"Yeah," I said. "We do."

And then I stood up and walked out.

I stepped out of The Velvet Noose and into the cold night air.

The city felt different now.

It wasn't just the rain, or the neon buzzing in the gutters, or the usual stink of cheap whiskey and expensive mistakes. It was the weight of something closing in.

I had a destination now. Gravenport Bank.

And I wasn't the only one heading there.

I lit a cigarette, took a slow drag, let the smoke curl between my teeth. Cain's men were moving. They'd torn through Eleanor's apartment, ripped her life apart looking for something they hadn't found. Now they were following the same bread crumbs I was.

They weren't just looking anymore.

They were hunting.

I started walking, coat pulled tight against the wind, thoughts running like a loaded gun in my head.

A safe deposit box. It made sense. Eleanor had never been stupid. She wouldn't have kept something that dangerous in her apartment, not if she knew Cain's people were coming for her.

So she'd put it somewhere they couldn't touch it.

Until now.

I reached the corner, stopped just under the glow of a busted streetlamp, and listened.

The city had a sound. A rhythm. When you knew it well enough, you could tell when something was off.

Tonight, something was off.

I wasn't alone.

I took another drag from my cigarette, keeping my posture loose, but my right hand in my coat, fingers wrapped around the grip of my .38.

Behind me, a car idled at the curb, headlights off. Not a cab. Not some drunk trying to remember where he lived. Someone watching. Waiting.

Ahead, parked under a diner's neon sign, another car. Different make. Same intention.

I let out a slow breath. Two tails.

That meant one thing.

They didn't just know where I was going.

They were making sure I got there.

Gravenport Bank sat on the corner of Linden and Cross, a hulking stone relic from another era.

By day, it was all polished marble and men in pressed suits, a place where the rich kept their sins locked away in cold steel boxes. By night, it was a mausoleum—dark, empty, and waiting.

I wasn't walking through the front door.

I moved through the alley, coat tight around me, boots silent against the wet pavement. The back entrance was old—a thick, rusted metal door that hadn't been updated in decades. Banks like this didn't worry about break-ins. Their real security was the people who owned them.

Too bad for them.

I pulled a set of picks from my pocket, hands steady, muscles remembering old habits from bad years.

The lock wasn't complicated. I had it turned in seconds.

The door creaked open, and I slipped inside.

The air inside was cold. Stale.

I moved through the narrow corridors, past rows of empty teller windows, through the shadowed vault room. I knew the layout. Eleanor's safe deposit box was kept in the private wing, past the main vault, beyond the security checkpoint.

I kept low, footsteps soft, gun drawn.

Not a lot of guards. Banks like this didn't need muscle at night. They had cops on the payroll.

That was what worried me.

Cain knew.

He knew about Eleanor. Knew about the ledger. And if he had half a brain, he had men waiting for me.

I moved fast.

Down the hall, past rows of steel vault doors, past portraits of dead men who built this city and the crooks who ran it now.

I reached Vault 17.

Eleanor's box.

I pulled a key from my pocket—the one Delilah had pressed into my hand at the last second, murmuring "Don't say I never did you a favor."

I slid it into the lock.

The door clicked open.

I stepped inside.

And there it was.

A single, metal safe deposit box, sitting on the middle shelf.

I ran my fingers along the edge, felt the cold weight of it. Whatever was inside, Eleanor had died for it.

I lifted it.

And then the alarms screamed.

A sharp, piercing wail filled the air, vibrating through the walls. Red lights flashed.

I'd been set up.

A door slammed somewhere behind me.

Footsteps. Fast. Heavy. Armed.

Cain's men were here.

I clenched my jaw, tucking the box under my arm. No time. No thinking. Just moving.

The only way out was through.

The second the alarm shrieked to life, I knew I'd been set up.

The walls pulsed with red light, the sound drilling into my skull, vibrating through the vault like a hammer against bone.

I gritted my teeth and moved.

The ledger was in my hands. A slim, leather-bound book, heavier than it should have been. Like it carried more than just names and numbers—like it carried bodies.

I stuffed it into my coat and turned toward the door. Boots pounded against marble floors. Voices barked orders. The cavalry was coming.

I had seconds.

I glanced around the vault. No direct exits. Just one way in, one way out. The kind of design that made sure nobody walked away with something they weren't supposed to.

Which meant I had to improvise.

I reached into my coat, fingers closing around a small, metal surprise.

A single flashbang.

Not a grenade. Not lethal. Just enough to turn the room into a swirling mess of light and sound. The kind of trick you hold onto for a night just like this.

I pulled the pin, counted to three, and tossed it.

It clinked against the floor.

And then the world exploded in white.

Shouts. Curses. Guns cocking blindly.

I moved fast.

Darted out of the vault, slipping past the first set of guards—blinded, stumbling, clutching at their ears. I hit the hallway, dodging past columns, the red glow of the alarm pulsing like a slow, sick heartbeat.

Cain's men were coming.

The cops were coming.

And the only way I was getting out of here was if I made them bleed first.

The world was all red light and gunfire.

The first thug through the vault door barely had time to register my silhouette in the flashing alarm glow before I put two rounds in his chest.

He hit the floor hard, his gun clattering against the marble.

The second bastard was quicker. He fired.

I threw myself sideways, rolling behind a thick iron deposit box, the shot sparking off the steel. The echo rang in my ears, drowning out the alarm.

More voices shouted orders down the hall.

More boots pounded toward me.

I popped up, fired twice.

One shot caught the second thug in the shoulder. He stumbled, grunting in pain.

The other bullet missed.

Didn't matter. I was already moving.

I sprinted out of the vault, weaving between marble columns as bullets tore into the walls behind me. Cain's men weren't amateurs. They weren't spraying and praying. They were cutting off my exits, herding me.

I needed a way out.

Fast.

I hit the main lobby, skidding behind the front desk. My ribs screamed. The stitches in my side tore open. Warm blood soaked into my shirt, but I shoved the pain aside.

A thug with a shotgun rounded the corner.

I lunged, grabbing the lamp off the desk and smashing it across his face.

He went down hard, the shotgun clattering to the tile.

I grabbed it, pumping a shell into the chamber just as two more of Cain's boys stormed in.

Boom.

The first blast took the nearest one off his feet.

The second bastard dove behind cover.

I ran.

The front doors were too far. Cain's men were closing in.

My eyes darted to the left—a side hall leading to the fire exit.

I made a break for it, my boots pounding against marble, pulse hammering.

Bullets whistled past my ears.

I reached the door, shoulder-checked it open, and stumbled into the alley beyond.

The city swallowed me whole.

I hit the alley hard, boots skidding against wet pavement, the cold night air slamming into my lungs like a punch. The pain in my side was worse now. The fresh stitches had torn open, and hot blood soaked into my shirt, mixing with the rain and the stink of the city.

But I was still breathing.

And I had the ledger.

The shouts behind me grew distant as I stumbled into the fog, each step a war between my body and the concrete beneath it. The city swallowed me in thick smoke and neon glow, the alley stretching out ahead like a mouth ready to close.

I had seconds.

Seconds before Cain's men regrouped, before the sirens joined the hunt, before the city itself turned against me. I needed to disappear.

I cut through the maze of backstreets, past rusted fire escapes and dumpsters overflowing with last week's sins. The pain in my ribs sent sharp warnings through my body, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. Not yet.

A car engine revved somewhere close. Tires splashed through puddles.

I flattened against a brick wall, panting, pulse hammering against my skull.

I wasn't alone.

I took a slow breath, forcing my body to stay still. My fingers curled around the ledger in my coat. It felt heavier than it should've. Like it knew exactly what it was worth. Like it knew what people were willing to kill for.

Through the fog, a black sedan rolled past the mouth of the alley.

Cain's men.

They weren't just looking.

They were hunting.

The sedan slowed, the headlights cutting through the mist like knives. I pressed deeper into the shadows, my hand tightening around my gun, heart slamming against my ribs.

For a second—just a second—I thought they'd seen me.

Then the car sped up, disappearing around the corner.

I let out a breath, pushing off the wall, forcing myself to keep moving. I needed a place to lay low. Somewhere Cain's men wouldn't think to look. Somewhere the city wouldn't chew me up before the night was over.

I was bleeding. I was hunted.

But I had the one thing Cain didn't.

And that meant the game was changing.

The night pressed in from all sides, thick with rain and the stench of the city's rot. I moved like a ghost through the streets, coat heavy with blood, boots splashing through puddles that smelled like old whiskey and fresh regret.

I had the ledger.

And now, every man in Gravenport with a gun and a death wish would be coming for me.

I needed a place to lay low, but there was no such thing as safe anymore.

I turned the corner, stepping out onto a quieter block—no neon signs, no bars bleeding noise onto the sidewalk, just old buildings with boarded-up windows and streetlamps flickering like bad memories.

And that's when I felt it.

That slow, crawling sensation at the back of my neck.

I wasn't alone.

I exhaled, slow and steady, kept my stride normal. Didn't look over my shoulder. Didn't break pace.

But I knew someone was watching.

I crossed the street, stepping into the glow of a busted streetlamp, letting my shadow stretch long across the pavement. The rain slicked everything in silver and black, turning the whole city into a reflection of itself.

And there—**across the street, half-hidden in the fog and the glow of a dying neon sign—
**stood a figure.

Not moving. Not hiding. Just waiting.

A cigarette ember flared in the dark.

I finally turned my head, meeting their gaze. A shape barely visible through the mist. A long coat. A stance that said they weren't in a hurry.

They'd been following me.

I stood there, breathing, heartbeat slow and steady.

Whoever they were, they weren't Cain's men.

Cain's guys didn't watch from a distance. They put you in the ground before you saw them coming.

So that meant one thing.

Someone else was in the game now.

The figure took a slow drag from their cigarette, then turned and vanished into the mist.

I didn't follow.

Didn't need to.

They'd find me again.

And when they did, I'd have questions.

Because whatever I thought this was before...

The game had changed.

And I wasn't the only one playing anymore.

The Man Who Owns the City

I found a place to hole up in—a busted old motel off Rosewood and 9th, the kind of joint where the sheets hadn't been washed since the Eisenhower administration and the walls were thin enough to hear the sins of the guy next door.

Didn't matter. I wasn't here to sleep.

I locked the door, shoved a chair under the handle, and pulled the ledger from my coat.

It was smaller than I expected, bound in worn black leather, the kind of book that wouldn't stand out on a bookshelf. But it was heavy. Too heavy for something that small.

I ran my fingers over the cover, then flipped it open.

And there it was.

Names.

Rows and rows of names.

Handwritten in neat, careful script, like a priest keeping a record of the damned.

Politicians. Judges. Cops. Businessmen.

Every one of them had a number beside their name. Payments.

Some were just a few thousand. Bribes. Others were high six figures. Payouts. And then there were the big ones. The ones marked with an "X" instead of a number.

The dead ones.

I scanned the list, my breath coming slow, steady.

Some of the names, I recognized.

Others, I'd heard whispered in dark corners.

And one at the very bottom, written in the same careful hand as the rest, made my stomach turn to stone.

Eleanor Voss.

There was no number beside her name.

Just an "X."

She never had a chance.

I leaned back, staring at the ceiling, the weight of the ledger pressing into my hands.

This wasn't just a list of payoffs.

This was a kill list.

And Lucius Cain didn't just own this city.

He controlled who lived in it.

The ledger sat heavy in my hands, thicker than paper, thicker than ink.

It was a death sentence.

Not just Eleanor's. Mine, too.

I ran my fingers over her name, tracing the black "X" that sealed her fate.

She knew.

She must have found out about Cain's operation—about the judges on his payroll, the cops who did his dirty work, the politicians who smiled while he signed their checks. She must have thought she could do something about it.

She was wrong.

And now she was dead.

I sat back, staring at the peeling wallpaper, the low hum of the motel's buzzing neon sign drilling into my skull.

Eleanor wasn't just another name in a long list of bodies Cain had stacked over the years. She was different.

She fought back.

And for that, they put a bullet in her and left her in the rain.

I took a slow breath, ran a hand down my face.

She wasn't the only one.

There were others. Names I didn't recognize—some with "X"s beside them, some still breathing. How long did they have left? How long did I?

Cain had played this city like a grand piano, and every man in power was just another note in his song.

Eleanor tried to stop the music.

And now, so would I.

I closed the ledger, tucking it into my coat. The city felt different now.

The shadows stretched a little longer. The air was a little heavier.

This wasn't just a job anymore.

This was war.

And I had just declared it.

The sky hung low over Gravenport, choked in smog and broken streetlights, the stars long buried under the weight of the city's filth.

Rain drizzled in sheets, fine enough to be mist, cold enough to settle in the bones. The streets gleamed under the occasional neon flicker, colors bleeding into the puddles—reds, blues, sickly greens. A patchwork of light disguising the rot beneath.

I walked slow, coat pulled tight, hat low over my eyes. Every step sent a dull pulse through my ribs where the stitches barely held. Pain kept me moving. Kept me sharp.

Cain's men were looking for me, but I wasn't hiding. Not yet.

I needed help.

And there was only one man left in this city I could still trust—Detective Roy Mercer.

Mercer had been a cop since before Gravenport lost its soul. Back when the badge still meant something, back when the force was more than just Cain's personal cleanup crew.

Now?

He was one of the last good ones.

Not clean, but not rotten.

We'd been partners once, years ago, before I left the force and he got stuck holding the line between law and chaos. Before Cain tightened his grip around the city's throat and called it progress.

I found him where I always found him.

A dive called Frankie's, tucked between a boarded-up pawn shop and a pharmacy that did more business under the table than over it. The kind of joint where the floor was sticky, the air was thick with cheap smoke, and the jukebox played old jazz on a loop.

I stepped inside, shaking the rain from my coat, scanning the booths.

There he was.

Roy Mercer.

Slumped in a booth in the back, a half-empty glass of something brown in front of him, his sleeves rolled up, tie loose, the bags under his eyes deep enough to hold water.

He looked up as I approached, his eyes sharp despite the liquor.

"Kade," he muttered, rolling the ice in his glass. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you again."

I slid into the seat across from him, resting my forearms on the sticky table.

"Yeah, well," I said, motioning to the bottle. "You drinking alone these days?"

Mercer smirked, shaking his head. "Wouldn't call it drinking. More like waiting."

"For what?"

He exhaled through his nose, staring at his glass. "For this city to finally kill me."

I let that sit between us for a moment.

Then I reached into my coat and slid the ledger onto the table.

His eyes flicked down, then back up to me.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Proof," I said. "Of everything."

He didn't move. Didn't reach for it. Didn't want to know.

"Don't do this, Kade," he muttered.

"You haven't even looked at it yet."

"I don't have to," he said, pushing his glass aside. "I already know what's inside. And so do you."

I met his gaze. He wasn't scared. Just tired.

"You think I want to get involved in this?" Mercer said, voice low, measured. "I've got a wife, Kade. A daughter. I made my peace a long time ago."

"You made your peace," I said, tapping the ledger. "Eleanor didn't get that chance."

His jaw tightened.

I let the silence stretch. Outside, thunder rumbled in the distance, the rain tapping against the window like fingers drumming on glass.

Finally, Mercer sighed. Ran a hand through his graying hair.

"Christ," he muttered.

And then, finally, he picked up the book.

Mercer flipped through the ledger, his fingers slow, deliberate. Each turn of the page added weight to his shoulders. His brow furrowed, his lips pressed into a thin line.

He already knew what was inside.

Now he had to see it for himself.

I watched his eyes scan the names—judges, politicians, cops. Some of them I recognized, some of them I didn't. Every one of them was bought and paid for. Some had been silenced for good.

Mercer let out a breath, closed the book, and pushed it back across the table.

His fingers lingered on the cover for half a second.

Then he took his hand away, like it burned to touch.

"You shouldn't have brought this to me, Kade," he muttered.

"You're the last honest cop in this city," I said.

"Yeah?" He gave a dry, humorless chuckle. "Then maybe you should've let me stay that way."

I picked up the ledger, slid it back into my coat.

"You don't have to help," I said. "But you don't get to pretend you don't know anymore."

Mercer sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

"You don't get it, do you?" He leaned forward, voice low, like he didn't want the walls to hear. "This isn't a war you can win."

I met his gaze.

"I never cared about winning."

The words hung between us, heavy with things we weren't saying.

Mercer shook his head, sat back in his seat.

"You got a plan?" he asked.

"Not yet," I admitted.

"You gonna get yourself killed?"

"Probably."

He exhaled, staring at the whiskey in his glass like it held answers.

Then, finally, he muttered, "If I were you, I'd start with the judge."

That got my attention.

"What judge?"

He gave me a look.

"The one who signs all of Cain's warrants. The one who buries every case before it sees the inside of a courtroom." He leaned in again. "The one who keeps his hands clean while Cain does the dirty work."

I tapped my fingers against the table. Mercer was sticking his neck out just by telling me this.

But it was the first real lead I had.

"The judge got a name?" I asked.

Mercer hesitated.

Then, in a voice just above a whisper—

"Judge Nathaniel Arlen."

I leaned back, letting the name settle in my brain.

The city had been rotting for a long time.

And now I knew where the decay started.

Mercer sat there for a long time, staring at the last of his whiskey like it might give him the answers he didn't want.

Outside, the rain tapped against the windows in slow, rhythmic beats. A tired city. A tired man.

Finally, he sighed.

"Alright," he muttered. "I'm in."

I leaned back in the booth, watching him, waiting.

"You sure?" I asked.

He let out a breath. "No. But if I say no, I'm gonna spend the rest of my life pretending I don't know what I know. And I can't do that."

I nodded. That was the thing about Mercer—he could stomach the dirt, but he couldn't drown in it. Not like the others.

"So what's the play?" he asked, straightening up, rolling his shoulders like a man about to step back into a fight he thought he'd left behind.

"We leak it," I said, tapping my coat where the ledger sat heavy inside. "Send copies to the right people. Media, maybe some feds outside of Cain's reach. Burn his whole empire down in one move."

Mercer rubbed his jaw. "And you think that'll stop him?"

"No," I admitted. "But it'll wound him. And a wounded man makes mistakes."

Mercer was quiet for a second. Then he nodded.

"Alright," he said. "But we need to do this smart. You got a place to lay low?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I can disappear for a while. Long enough to get the pages scanned and sent out."

Mercer drummed his fingers against the table, thinking. "I know a guy. Ex-reporter. Used to cover the corruption beat before Cain shut him down. Name's Elliot Graves. He's got a printing press in his basement, still puts out an underground rag. If anyone can get this out, it's him."

I nodded. "Where do I find him?"

Mercer opened his mouth—then froze.

His eyes flicked over my shoulder.

I didn't turn around. Didn't need to.

The air in the room had changed. That slow, creeping silence that comes before the storm.

Mercer's fingers curled around his glass. His jaw tightened.

And I knew.

Cain wasn't done yet.

He'd found us.

I exhaled slow.

Then I reached for my gun.

Hell's Welcome Mat

The warehouse sat at the edge of the city like a forgotten corpse.

It was an old shipping depot, long since abandoned, the kind of place where dust settled like snowfall and rust crept over steel beams like cancer. Half the windows were shattered, the other half so caked in grime they barely let the moonlight through. It smelled like oil, rain, and bad memories.

Mercer and I had been here an hour, and neither of us had said much.

We sat in the dark, the only light coming from the neon flicker of a broken EXIT sign over the side door. The kind of light that buzzed, flickered, and made you wonder when it was finally going to die.

Mercer was pacing, rolling his shoulders, his old service revolver hanging loose in his grip.

"Graves is late," he muttered, voice low.

"He'll show," I said.

"You trust him?"

I let out a slow breath, watching the fog curl in through the busted window panes. "I trust that he hates Cain more than he's afraid of him. That's enough."

Mercer snorted. "Yeah? Well, I'd feel a hell of a lot better if he wasn't making us sit in a damn graveyard while we wait."

I didn't disagree.

The place was too quiet. Too empty. The only sound was the occasional creak of metal shifting, the wind howling through the holes in the roof.

"You ever wonder why these places get left behind?" Mercer asked after a minute.

I glanced at him.

He kept his eyes on the shadows, jaw tight. "This warehouse used to be part of a big shipping outfit. Lotta money ran through here. Then one day, the whole operation packed up and left. No explanation. No reason. Just... gone." He shook his head. "Like the city swallowed it whole."

I exhaled smoke, watching the embers from my cigarette glow in the dark.

"This city eats a lot of things," I muttered. "People. Places. Good intentions."

Mercer gave a dry chuckle. "Yeah. And somehow, we're the dumb bastards still standing in the middle of it."

I didn't respond.

Instead, I turned toward the main entrance, where the thick metal doors stood closed, locked, the paint peeling from years of neglect.

Something was off.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

Mercer must've felt it too, because he stopped pacing.

"You hear that?" he muttered.

I listened.

The wind whistled. The walls groaned.

And underneath it all—something else.

A faint, deliberate click.

A sound I knew too well.

I dropped my cigarette and stomped it out, standing slow.

Mercer followed my lead, his grip tightening on his gun.

"We ain't alone," he murmured.

I nodded once. "No, we're not."

The meeting hadn't started yet.

But the ambush had.

The first gunshot shattered the silence like a hammer through glass.

I dropped fast, shoulder hitting the concrete floor, rolling behind a stack of rusted crates as the air exploded with lead.

Mercer wasn't as lucky.

His body jerked back, his gun slipping from his fingers as the bullet punched into his chest. He stumbled, knocking over a pile of old pallets, clutching at the wound like he could hold his life in with just his hands.

"Mercer!"

His eyes flicked to me, wide with shock—not fear, just disbelief. Like he always knew this was how it ended, but it still caught him off guard.

More shots rang out, ricocheting off steel beams, kicking up dust and splinters.

I gritted my teeth, shoved my back against the crates, and snapped off two shots toward the shadows by the entrance. A grunt. A crash. One of them went down.

But there were more.

Too many.

A dozen footsteps rushed across the concrete, moving fast, spreading out. Cain's men. Black suits, black gloves, black hearts.

They weren't here to scare us.

They were here to bury us.

Mercer let out a wet cough, struggling to stay upright. He reached for his gun, his grip weak, the barrel shaking as he lifted it.

Another shot.

This one hit him in the stomach.

He slammed back against the crates, sagging down, blood pooling beneath him.

I fired again, knocking another bastard off his feet.

Didn't matter.

There were too many.

I had seconds.

I could stay. Die here. Go down with him.

Or I could run.

Finish what we started.

I clenched my jaw. My teeth ground together. My lungs burned.

Then I grabbed the ledger, shoved it deeper into my coat, and moved.

I sprinted toward the side exit, boots pounding against concrete, bullets ripping through the air behind me.

Another shot grazed my shoulder, hot fire searing across my skin.

I hit the door with my full weight, shoulder screaming in protest.

It burst open.

I stumbled into the alley, the cold night slapping me in the face like a bad joke. Rain slicked the pavement, turned it into a mirror of neon and blood.

Behind me, I heard Mercer wheeze. Choke.

I turned back for a fraction of a second—just enough to see him slump forward, his head falling, his chest rising one last time.

Then nothing.

I wanted to go back.

But Cain's men were already storming through the warehouse, coming for me next.

I ran.

The rain swallowed me whole.

And Mercer was gone.

The city blurred past me in streaks of neon and rain, my boots pounding against the pavement, my coat soaked in blood, sweat, and vengeance.

I didn't feel the cold.

I didn't feel the pain in my ribs, the sting of the bullet grazing my shoulder, or the ache in my lungs as I ran through the empty streets.

All I felt was rage.

Hot. Consuming.

The kind that hollowed a man out, leaving nothing but the desire to destroy.

Mercer was dead.

Shot down like a dog, bleeding out in that goddamn warehouse while Cain's men laughed and reloaded. He'd told me this wasn't a war I could win. Maybe he was right.

But winning didn't matter anymore.

I wasn't here to win.

I was here to burn Cain to the ground.

I ducked into an alley, leaning against a crumbling brick wall, sucking in a deep breath.

The rain poured, washing away the blood on my hands, but it didn't wash away the truth.

I'd been playing this all wrong.

The plan was to expose Cain. Leak the ledger. Let the truth take him down.

But Cain didn't care about the truth.

The city already belonged to him, its judges, its cops, its politicians—all stitched together in his pocket like a tailored suit. No scandal could bring him down.

No.

If I wanted Cain to fall, I'd have to do it myself.

One bullet at a time.

I pressed my back against the wall, let my head drop back, eyes shutting for just a second. My heart pounded in my ears.

Mercer's last words echoed in my skull.

"This isn't a war you can win."

I opened my eyes.

Didn't matter.

I was done playing defense.

Cain had been hunting me.

Now it was my turn.

Gravenport was built on lies, blood, and bad money.

Tonight, it was going to burn.

I moved through the city like a ghost, slipping in and out of the shadows, the weight of steel, powder, and fire strapped to my back.

Cain's empire wasn't just built on backroom deals and bodies in alleys—it had pillars. Foundations holding it together.

His casinos.

His drug dens.

His clubs.

Each one a beating heart, pumping filth through the city's veins. And I was going to cut them open.

The first stop was The Crimson Ace.

Cain's crown jewel casino, sitting right in the heart of downtown, its red neon sign pulsing like a heartbeat, calling in gamblers, losers, and men looking to drown themselves in booze and regret.

The security was tight, but I wasn't going in through the front.

I slipped in through the maintenance tunnels beneath the building, crawling through dust, rats, and the ghosts of old prohibition smuggling routes.

I planted the first charge behind the main generator.

Wouldn't take much. Just one spark. One boom. And Cain's money-laundering palace would come crumbling down.

Next, The Grey Orchid.

A club, but not the kind you take your wife to.

Cain ran his drug business out of the back rooms, a place where men whispered deals over expensive cigars while girls barely old enough to know better danced under dim red lights.

I crept along the rooftop, moving low, careful. The rain masked my footsteps.

Two guards at the back entrance. I handled them quiet.

Then I slid inside and set the charges under the bar.

This wasn't just about Cain's money.

It was about taking everything from him.

Last stop—The Black Hand.

The real headquarters.

Not a casino, not a club—a fortress.

A three-story compound Cain used for his highest-level operations. Drugs. Guns. People. The kind of place men went into and never came out of.

I crouched in the darkness, breath slow, watching the guards at the gates, knowing this one would be different.

The Black Hand wouldn't just fall from an explosion.

I had to go inside.

I exhaled, flexed my fingers around the trigger of the detonator in my coat pocket.

The city had always belonged to Cain.

But by sunrise, it was going to bleed.

The city was a fuse.

And I had already lit the match.

The Crimson Ace. The Grey Orchid. The Black Hand.
Three pillars of Cain's empire, wired to burn.

The bombs were set, the charges primed, the city ready to bleed.

But Cain wasn't the kind of man to watch from the sidelines.

I needed to draw him out.

Make it personal.

So I left him a message.

It had to be simple. Direct. No room for misinterpretation.

A single envelope, hand-delivered by one of his lower-level guys, a messenger too scared to ask questions.

Inside, a note written in bold, steady ink.

"Meet me at The Black Spire. Midnight. Come alone."

No threats. No explanations.

Cain was smart enough to understand exactly what it meant.

A final reckoning.

The Black Spire sat on the edge of the city, an abandoned steel mill left to rot in the bones of Gravenport's industrial district.

A place where ghosts whispered through rusted beams, where the only sound was the wind howling through hollowed-out smokestacks.

No witnesses. No distractions.

Just me and him.

One way or another, this ended tonight.

The Devil and the Dead Man

The Black Spire rose over the city like a forgotten god, its bones rotting steel and broken glass, its heart long abandoned.

Once, it had been Cain's first kingdom. The place where he cut his teeth, made his first deals, spilled his first blood. Before the casinos, before the clubs, before he owned the judges and the cops, he built his empire in this very tower.

Now, it was just a carcass.

A monument to what he used to be.

Fitting.

Because tonight, it would be his tomb.

I stepped inside, boots crunching over shattered glass.

The air smelled like rust and old rain, the kind of damp that seeped into concrete and stayed there, turning everything to rot.

The city stretched below through cracked windows, its neon glow pulsing like a dying heart.

I climbed the stairs, slow and steady, pain dragging against my ribs with every step. The ledger was still tucked in my coat, a weight heavier than the gun strapped to my hip.

Midnight was coming.

Cain would be here soon.

And he'd know exactly why I picked this place.

Because this was where it all began.

Now, it was where it would end.

Midnight struck.

The wind howled through the shattered windows of The Black Spire, whistling through rusted beams like the ghosts of old sins crying for vengeance.

I waited in the shadows, gun drawn, lungs steady.

And then Lucius Cain walked in.

He stepped onto the grime-covered concrete of the upper floor, the place where he had built his empire from dust and blood.

Two men flanked him.

Black suits, black gloves. Hired killers.

Cain didn't bring just any muscle. These weren't the usual thugs with twitchy trigger fingers and no brains. These were professionals.

But they didn't know they were already dead.

Cain stopped in the center of the room, adjusting his cuffs like he was at a goddamn business meeting.

Even now, he looked like he owned the city.

I stepped out of the shadows, gun raised. "You came."

He smiled. A slow, cruel thing. "Of course, Vincent. You made an appointment. I always honor my appointments."

His bodyguards shifted, eyes scanning the room, hands hovering near their holsters.

I let them sweat.

"I expected you to be smarter," I said. "Coming here. Bringing them."

Cain raised a brow. "What, you thought I'd come alone?"

"I thought you'd have a little dignity when I put you in the ground."

The smirk lingered, but his eyes turned sharp. "You always were an idealist."

I pulled the trigger.

The first body dropped before the second man even got his gun out.

A headshot. Clean. Fast.

The second bastard spun toward me, pistol halfway drawn.

Too slow.

I emptied two rounds into his chest. He staggered back, feet skidding against the dirty floor before collapsing in a heap.

Smoke curled from my barrel.

And now it was just me and Cain.

He didn't move. Didn't flinch.

Just adjusted his tie.

"You've always been predictable, Vince."

I exhaled slow, stepping toward him. "And you've always been a dead man walking."

Cain chuckled.

Then he pulled his own gun.

The city stretched below us, neon and smog, dirt and regret.

The Black Spire had no power, no life—just the wind howling through steel beams and the distant wail of sirens that would never come in time.

It was just me and him now.

Lucius Cain stood across the ruined floor, gun raised, eyes sharp, lips curled into a smirk that didn't belong to a man about to die.

I kept mine trained on him, finger light on the trigger, breath steady.

"This how you saw it ending, Vince?" Cain asked, his voice calm, like we were sharing drinks instead of standing in each other's crosshairs.

I didn't answer.

"You think killing me changes anything?" he pressed, his smirk widening. "You think the city stops rotting just because one man gets put in the ground?"

The wind pushed against the broken windows, rattling old steel, moaning like ghosts in the rafters.

"You really believe that ledger matters?" he continued. "You could burn down every casino, every club, every goddamn bank in this city, and it still wouldn't be enough."

I exhaled slow.

"I know," I said.

Cain's smirk faltered. Just a flicker. But I saw it.

"You're right," I went on. "Killing you doesn't fix a damn thing."

I took a step forward.

"But it's a start."

A single crack of thunder.

The shot rang out, echoing through the empty tower.

Cain staggered back, a red bloom spreading across his chest, his expensive suit darkening with blood.

He opened his mouth, but no words came.

Just a slow, wheezing breath.

He looked down at the wound, then back at me. Disbelief. Like he never really thought I'd do it.

I lowered my gun, watching as he stumbled back.

"You—" he tried, but the words failed him.

He collapsed to his knees.

The neon from the city below flickered in his dark eyes. No power. No control. Just a dying man in a place he thought he owned.

I stood over him.

"You built this city on blood," I said. "Now it's taking some back."

Cain laughed.

A wet, ragged sound. He coughed, blood dripping from his lips, but he still smiled.

"Then you better watch your back, Kade," he rasped. "Because now you're the one wearing the crown."

I didn't answer.

I just stepped back, turned, and walked away as Lucius Cain bled out on the floor of his own kingdom.

The wind howled through the broken bones of The Black Spire.

Steel beams groaned in the dark, rusted metal and shattered glass catching the faint glow of the city below. Gravenport stretched beneath us like a graveyard, the neon flickering like dying embers, the streets pulsing with the rot Cain had fed for years.

Lucius Cain stood across from me, blood already blooming across his suit, but he was still smiling.

"You think this changes anything?" he rasped, voice tight with pain, but still steady.

"You think you kill me and suddenly the world gets better?"

His breath hitched. His stance wavered. But his eyes stayed locked on mine, cold, amused, almost pitying.

"This city doesn't need me," he murmured. "Never did."

The wind kicked up dust between us, howling through the steel bones of the tower.

"You think you're any different?" Cain whispered. "You think you're not just another bastard with a gun, making the rules up as you go?"

He swayed slightly, blinking slow. The blood in his suit was spreading.

"You kill me," he continued, "and another man just steps in. Maybe you. Maybe someone worse. This city doesn't change, Kade. It just finds a new monster to wear the crown."

I exhaled slow.

My grip tightened around the gun.

"I know," I said.

Cain's smirk flickered, just for a second.

"But it's a start."

I pulled the trigger.

The gunshot split the night wide open.

Cain's body jerked back, the force slamming him against the rusted railing. His knees buckled. His fingers grasped at the wound in his chest, dark and wet, like he thought he could hold himself together.

He staggered.

His mouth opened, but no words came. Just blood.

He collapsed to his knees, head tilted back toward the ruined ceiling, the dying tower that had been his kingdom.

The city stretched below him, sprawling, endless.

And then he fell.

His body pitched backward over the railing, slipping into the night, swallowed whole by the darkness.

I listened.

Waited.

Then, faintly, the dull, sickening sound of impact.

Silence.

The wind sighed through the wreckage, whispering through the ruins of Cain's first empire.

I let out a slow breath. Holstered my gun.

It was over.

For now.

I stood at the edge of the wreckage, boots firm against the rusted steel, the city stretching below in an ocean of neon and shadow.

Lucius Cain was gone.

And Gravenport was on fire.

Far below, the first explosion rocked the night.

The Crimson Ace went up in a shower of glass and flame, red embers spilling into the dark like blood from a fresh wound. The Grey Orchid followed. A second boom, fire licking the sky, devouring Cain's empire one club, one casino, one sin at a time.

The Black Hand was next.

The heart of his operation.

I could already hear the distant wail of sirens—too late, too slow.

The city had belonged to Cain.

Now it belonged to the fire.

I pulled a cigarette from my coat, lit it with shaking fingers. The first drag filled my lungs with something warmer than the cold air around me, the taste sharp and bitter.

I watched the city burn.

And I felt nothing.

Mercer was dead.

Eleanor was dead.

Cain was dead.

And me?

I was a ghost.

The rain started again. Slow at first, then harder, pattering against the steel beams, washing the blood from my coat, washing the ashes from the city.

But it wouldn't be enough.

Gravenport had always been dirty.

It would always be dirty.

Lucius Cain was gone, but the rot was still there, waiting, shifting, looking for its next king.

Mercer was right.

"This isn't a war you can win."

Maybe not.

But I wasn't here to win.

I flicked the cigarette into the void, watched it tumble through the air, glowing for a second before the wind swallowed it whole.

Then I stepped into the dark.

And I disappeared.

